Symposium—Public Administration, Social Equity, and Social Justice:
Future Journeys and Roads Less Traveled

Introduction

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This symposium has its origins in a paper (Oldfield, Candler, & Johnson, 2006) that argued that academic public administration has been slow to identify and address social equity issues. Scholarship on race and gender, “the meat” of social equity in the United States, did not start appearing in major journals in the field in the United States until two decades after women and minorities had taken to the streets to demand social equity. The paper also looked at sexual orientation and social class, identified as two major contemporary equity issues, and found that these issues had yet to gain traction in major journals in American public administration. This same pattern of following social trends, by decades rather than years, also held for the scholarship in the major journals in public administration in Australia, Brazil, and Canada. Oldfield, Candler, and Johnson close with the caution that “some long overdue attention to sexual orientation and social class is not enough. The discipline must lessen the likelihood that academic public administration will once again fail to identify the next major social equity issue” (p. 168).

This was the charge that we received when Administrative Theory & Praxis asked us to organize this symposium. The papers in the symposium raise some intriguing dimensions of the issue, but we argue in the Afterword that the symposium goes nowhere near far enough.

The most interesting, consistent theme of the papers included in this symposium concerned the issue of “space” as a dimension of social equity. Jean Mercier, a prominent French-Canadian scholar, provides an overview of the issue of geography and inequality in a developed world context. The issue
of space and inequality is also addressed empirically, in a developing world context, by Carolina Andion, Maurício Serva (an equally prominent Brazilian scholar) and their coauthors. In their analysis, the reality of regional inequality reminds us that poverty exists outside of the inner city. Andion and Serva’s analysis especially highlights the difficulty involved in breaking through the historical social relations that often create patterns of unequal opportunity within communities.

The issue of space was also evident in Obuya Bagaka’s discussion of the impact of “new public management” reforms on inequality in Kenya. Although his focus is on how “reforms have largely focused on the economic function of the Kenyan bureaucracy to the detriment of social equity and political stability,” there is a spatial element to the argument in that peripheral regions have suffered more than the center.

The paper by Johnson and Borrego adds a unique perspective to the symposium by addressing the importance and critical need for cultural competency skills. The authors contend that these skills will be important for all racial/ethnic groups as the notion of one dominant group or community quickly vanishes in the twenty-first century. In addition, Johnson and Borrego point out that the days of monolithic racial groupings will be in the past. Therefore, a sound grounding in cultural competencies will be essential for a successful workforce. Finally, Blue Wooldridge and Susan Gooden, two prominent contemporary American social equity scholars, provide the symposium with a summary of how we got here, along with intriguing comments regarding developing an awareness of what success would look like, so that efforts can be refocused. This would facilitate an evolving agenda of social equity scholarship, as attention is focused away from successes and toward emerging or previously overlooked issues. They also raise the international dimension, something prominent in the paper by Oldfield, Candler, and Johnson, and strongly evident in this symposium. We will have more to say about this in the Afterword.

**REFERENCE**